



A Woman's Immigrant Experience

Curriculum Unit 00.01.01
by Christine Calvanese

Introduction

This curriculum unit explores the lives of Julia Alvarez and Esmeralda Santiago. These two women write about themselves using different genres and each from contrasting backgrounds. However, they are both considered to be Latina, have had similar immigrant experiences, and settled in New York in the early sixties. It is clear that both women feel torn between two cultures and express themselves with a unique vivaciousness.

Esmeralda Santiago in her autobiography, *When I Was Puerto Rican*, writes about her childhood growing up in the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. Despite her family's hardships, Esmeralda is distraught for she must leave behind her father and happy memories to face new uncertainties. Esmeralda's heartbroken mother makes the decision to move herself and her seven children to New York. This beautifully written memoir tells an immigrant story with such honesty and simplicity.

Alvarez's *How The Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* is a work of fiction; however, the author tells her life story using pseudonyms, first person persona, and third person narrative. The Garcia family escapes from the Dominican Republic to the United States seeking political asylum. She also writes a personal essay entitled *Names/Nombres*.

This unit comprises all aspects of Language Arts: Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking. It also includes objectives and suggestions for integrated Social Studies. Although it is designed for special education students, most children would benefit from the structure provided. The objectives accomplish the use of three modalities of learning: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. Students learn differently and must be taught accordingly both in theory and practice. I estimate that it will take approximately four to six weeks to present a historical and literary overview, to read, write and discuss *When I Was Puerto Rican* and specific chapters of *How The Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*.

Pre-Reading Strategies (Social Studies)

Building Background Knowledge

The Dominican Republic is a country located on the island once known as Hispaniola in the Caribbean Sea. After Christopher Columbus discovered Hispaniola in 1492, the first Spanish settlements were built in the New World. The indigenous inhabitants were the Taino Indians who welcomed the Spanish Explorers. Beginning in 1503 the demands of sugarcane cultivation promoted the importation of African slaves. The Indian population died out by 1550. By the mid-1980's approximately 75% percent of the island's population was considered to be of African and Spanish decent. The Spanish Language dominates the country.

Puerto Rico is located in the Caribbean Sea and is considered a part of Latin America. Benjamin Keen explains in A History of Latin America that the demand for black slave labor in the West Indies in the early 1500's came as a result of the vanishing Indians and the growing development of sugar cane. It wasn't until after the Spanish-American War ended in 1898 that Puerto Rico became autonomous and was also considered to be a part of the United States. They were granted citizenship in 1917. Furthermore, in 1952 Puerto Rico was given "commonwealth" status. According to Thomas Skidmore and Peter Smith this relationship maintains ambiguity. From 1967 to 1993 the percentage of votes in favor of the commonwealth position dropped from 60 to 48.4 percent. The Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico share certain attributes: indigenous inhabitants, Spanish exploration, importation of African slaves, and modern racial diversity.

Prior to reading the literature I feel that it is important for teachers to discuss the meaning of diversity and the terminology associated with Latin America. Historically it was politically correct to categorize any Spanish speaking individual as Latin American or Spanish. It was after 1980 that the term Hispanic became the contemporary American way to describe any person who spoke Spanish as a first language, whose ancestors did, or even a person who had a Spanish surname, but may not have spoken the language. The Latin word for Hispanic (Hispanicus) means "of Spain." Because of its broad translation, the term itself raises political conflict. At the time it was also more favorable to be recognized as Latino rather than Hispanic. Finally, the majority of Latin Americans today prefer to be called by their more specific nationality or background rather than a broad label. The real issue here is that unawareness can make people demonstrate prejudices. We must educate ourselves and celebrate diversity.

Vocabulary Development

Merriam - Webster Dictionary

Objective

Students will write the definitions and discuss the meanings of vocabulary words

These words will later help students in writing their autobiographies.

1. immigrant (noun) - one that immigrates
2. immigrate (verb) - come into a place and take up residence
3. emigrant (noun) - one that emigrates
4. emigrate (verb) - leave a country to settle elsewhere

5. indigenous (adjective) - native to a particular region
6. culture (noun)
 - a. cultivation
 - b. refinement of intellectual and artistic taste
 - c. particular form or stage of civilization
7. nationality (noun)
 - a. national character
 - b. membership in a nation
 - c. political independence
 - d. ethnic group
8. ethnic (adjective) - relating to races or groups of people with common customs
9. race (noun)
 - a. family, tribe, people or nation of the same stock
 - b. division of mankind based on hereditary traits
10. custom (noun) - habitual course of action
11. Latin America (noun) - the part of the Americas south of the US
12. Hispanic (adjective) - of or relating to the people, speech, or culture of Spain, Spain and Portugal, or Latin America

Students will locate and highlight the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico using their maps.

Keen's A History of Latin America provides a clear map of Modern Caribbean Nations.

Literature

Author's Background

Julia Alvarez was born in New York City on March 27, 1950, and shortly after her birth moved to the Dominican Republic. When Julia was ten years old, she and her family emigrated to the United States. They had to flee the Dominican Republic because of her father's involvement in a failed attempt to overthrow the Trujillo Dictatorship. She would later go to college, pursue a career as a writer, and teach English at Middlebury College in Vermont. Julia is a writer of fiction. In an interview with Marny Requa she expresses her responsibility to make people aware of the culture and events during the dictatorship in the Dominican Republic.

Esmeralda Santiago was born in Puerto Rico in 1948 where she spent her childhood. She is the eldest of eleven children. In 1961 she, her mother, and siblings moved to Brooklyn. Esmeralda graduated from the High School for the Performing Arts, then studied at community colleges while working full time. She later attended Harvard University with a full scholarship, earned an M.F.A. from Sarah Lawrence College, is a journalist, and owns a film production company, Cantomedia, based in Boston.

As mentioned earlier Esmeralda had had an immigrant experience. However, according to the Oxford American Dictionary she truly is not an immigrant. Geoffrey Fox expresses in his book entitled *Hispanic Nation* that there have been many New York Puerto Rican memoirs; however, Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican* can be closely compared to the experience of many immigrants who arrive in the United States from poorer countries. The title has disturbed some descendants for they feel that it implies that one can cease being Puerto Rican. According to Fox Esmeralda was merely trying to "describe what was for her an obvious transformation." Recently, Esmeralda was a keynote speaker and discussed writing *When I Was Puerto Rican*, her first book. She states, "But as I've traveled around the country talking about it, people tell me that while the culture I'm describing may not be the same as the one they grew up in, the feelings and experiences are familiar, and some of the events could have been taken from their own lives." Julia Alvarez also recognizes the similarities among all people and feels it is her responsibility to express and share these insights. She states, "I am a Dominican, hyphen, American. As a fiction writer, I find that the most exciting things happen in the realm of that hyphen--the place where two words collide or blend together."

I feel that it is important for students to draw from their own experiences and through reading, reflection, and discussion demonstrate the ability to communicate their own opinions. I have designed several critical-thinking questions for students to respond to either orally or in written form. I suggest introducing a Response Journal for this unit alone, so that students can keep their notes and reflections organized. They can then have something to pull from when writing their autobiographies.

Narration

Objective

Students will discuss the different styles of narration as it relates to the unit

“ I “ = first person

An autobiography is written in first person.

“ I “ = first person persona

A made-up character who tells a story in first person.

Julia Alvarez uses this style of writing.

“ he, she, it, they “ = third person

The narrator is not in the story.

Critical Thinking Questions/ Activities

Names/Nombres

This autobiographical piece of literature focuses on Julia Alvarez’s experiences. While her purpose in writing this personal essay was to entertain, it was also meant to be informative.

Julia Altagracia Maria Teresa Alvarez Tavares Perello Espaillat Julia Perez Rochet Gonzalez is her full name, which, according to Dominican custom, includes her middle names, Mother’s and Father’s surnames for four generations back. Julia learned to deal with people mispronouncing and shortening her Spanish name. Her mother argued that it didn’t matter and quoted Shakespeare, “A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”

1. Explain what Shakespeare meant by, “A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”

Julia loved to write poetry as a child. Her Mami always thought that her daughter would be famous. In *How The Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* Julia writes about herself and family through a fictitious character named Yolanda, nicknamed Yo or YoYo. Her Mami always praised and boasted about her daughter’s natural talent for poetry. Even when she was three, she could draw a crowd and recite poetry.

Read pages 46-50 aloud to students.

2. Who was Mami boasting to at the poetry reading?

3. Describe Yolanda’s trip to New York when she was three.

When I Was Puerto Rican

Objectives

Students will look up the meaning of prologue in the dictionary

Students will read the introduction

Students will listen to appreciate literature

Students will pantomime their reactions to eating a sour or ripe guava

Procedure

Read and discuss the prologue of *When I Was Puerto Rican* in class. Esmeralda writes about a memory and how to eat guava. Julia Alvarez also writes about her antojos (craving) for guava. Teacher reads page eight of *How The Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* aloud in class. Teachers can bring in guavas and do a lesson on pantomime (an expression by bodily or facial movement). A green guava is sour, hard, and can make a person grimace while a ripe guava is yellow and tasty.

Jibara

Esmeralda was nicknamed Negi, and her story begins when she is four years old.

Objective

Students will look up the meaning of jibara in the Glossary and discuss its meaning.

1. How does being a jibara make Negi feel?
2. Do you have a nickname? If so, how did you acquire it and who gave it to you?
3. Describe how Esmeralda's mother treats her when she is covered with termites.

Fighting Naked

Mami and Papi argued mostly when he came back home after disappearing for days at a time.

1. Who is Margie?
2. If you just found out that you had a step-brother or sister, would you want to meet him or her? Why or why not?

Someone is Coming to Take Your Lap

Social Studies Link

Objectives

Students will locate and highlight San Juan, Puerto Rico using their own maps.

Students will define the following terms:

1. suburb – residential area adjacent to a city
2. metropolis – major city

3. finca – Spanish term for farm
4. capital – seat of government

Mami moved the family to Santurce, a suburb of San Juan.

1. If you closed your eyes with them crossed and then opened them, what would happen?
2. How did you feel when Negi was teased for being a jibara and not knowing Santa Claus?
3. Who were the Three Magi, and what did they bring the children?
4. Who is Alicia?

The American Invasion of Macun

According to Papi it was an insult to call any American a gringo. In school the children were vaccinated, given toothpaste and brushes, and fed.

1. Do you think Negi was disrespectful when she shouted, “My Mami and Papi can feed us without your disgusting gringo imperialist food?”
2. How do you feel about the way she acted and lied to avoid punishment at home?

Why Women Remain Jamona

Negi was sent to visit her grandmother, and her father forgot to pick her up. Mami who was pregnant at the time with her sixth child came instead.

1. Do you think Negi enjoyed visiting her grandmother, Abuela?
2. What does a woman remaining jamona mean?
3. After Negi realized how her mother must have suffered in Papi’s absence, how did she feel about remaining jamona?

Mami Gets A Job

Questions

1. How did the Santiago family prepare for the storm?
2. Why do you think the hurricane was named after a saint?
3. Who is Raymond?
4. How did Negi feel when her mother had to get a job sewing to support the family?
5. Do you think Mami depended on Negi too much? Why or why not?
6. What does it mean when Negi’s eyes turned green with envy?

7. Have you ever felt envy toward someone else and how did it feel inside?

8. Who was hurt in this chapter?

9. Describe how it happened?

El Mangle

Questions

1. Why do you think Mami packed the children and moved them from Macun to El Mangle?

2. Describe the bathroom situation in El Mangle.

3. Do you think it was appropriate how Esmerald's teacher treated her in class? How did this make you feel?

4. Would you have felt the same way as Esmeralda if you had to shut the eyes of a deceased infant baby for spiritual reasons?

Letters From New York

Papi wooed Mami back, and the family moved to one of Santruce's busiest avenues. It was a two bedroom apartment in the back of a building with a bar facing the street. Mami visited her mother, Tata, in New York and brought Raymond with her to have his foot looked at by a specialist.

Vocabulary

woo - try to gain the love or favor of

avenue - broad street

dulce - in Spanish it means something sweet

Questions

1. How do you think Negi felt having to stay with her aunt in her mother's absence?

2. What did Mami discover after she returned to Puerto Rico?

3. Describe the Santiago's Christmas Celebration?

4. How did Papi decorate the egg plant tree?

Cultural Link

Objective

Students will describe a family tradition that they are proud of sharing.

Casi Senorita

Questions

1. Did Don Luis have good intentions, and did he act appropriately during the piano lessons?
2. Describe Negi's relationship with her grandmother, Abuela. (page 179-181)
3. Why do you think the Santiago children acted badly when under the care of Generosa?
4. At this point how did Negi feel toward her mother?

Dreams Of A Better Life

After reading pages 189 -195, ask the students to predict what might happen next in the story.

1. (girls) Can you identify with Negi's anxieties of becoming a senorita?
2. (boys) Can you identify with the character, Johannes Velez, and his having to approach Negi and visiting her at home?

Esmeralda wrote, "The Puerto Rican jibara who longed for the green quiet of a tropical afternoon was to become a hybrid who would never forgive the uprooting."

What does the above quote mean?

Angels On The Ceiling

In this chapter Esmeralda describes her first experiences in New York and her new school. Before reading the remaining few chapters of this book, follow the lesson plan below.

How The Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents By: Julia Alvarez

Objectives:

Students will answer and discuss critical thinking questions

Students will compare and contrast two pieces of literature

"The Blood of the Conquistadores"

In this Chapter the Garcia Family escapes from the Dominican Republic to the United States. Compare and Contrast Esmeralda's and Yolanda's immigrant experiences in New York City. How were their experiences in having to leave their lives behind different? Were there any similarities?

"Snow"

Yolanda was educated in a Catholic school taught by the Sisters of Charity. Compare and Contrast Esmeralda's and Yolanda's first school experiences. How were their experiences different? Were there any similarities?

When I Was Puerto Rican By: Esmeralda Santiago

You Don't Want To Know

Papi never married Mami who gave birth to his seven children. Shortly after Mami left Puerto Rico, he married another woman. She still, however, reminded the children not to forget their father especially on Christmas, Father's Day and his birthday. Mami finally found love and had another baby, but soon after, lost Francisco to cancer and got laid off from her job.

Questions

1. Do you think Mami was a good Mother? Why or why not?
2. How did the children view Mami since their father was no longer with them?

A Shot At It

Questions

1. Where did the family move after Francisco's death?
2. What did their moving again mean for the children?
3. Describe Negi's desire to be accepted at the High School for the Performing Arts.

Epilogue

A decade after her highschool graduation, Esmeralda visited the school and spoke to her mentor. She mentioned that it was Esmeralda's courage to recite a monologue (speech) with such little English speaking ability that got her accepted.

Objective

Students will translate the meaning of the author's phrases

1. Same jibaro, different horse.
2. "P.A. '66," I said to no one in particular. "One of these days." (page 270)

Assignment

Objective

Students will research their own ancestry and share this knowledge using the interview process

Procedure

Each student will be given the opportunity to interview and to be interviewed. This activity will later help students in writing their own autobiographies.

Conclusion

As a culminating activity students will give oral presentations by sharing their autobiographies. Students may also bring in food to share and to help express their culture. Afterwards this could lead into a great debate as to what type of genre is preferable. Teachers also may assign students to rewrite their autobiographies using third person narrative. This task may be difficult for some, and if so, count the work as extra credit. Poetry writing can also be implemented at the individual teacher's discretion.

Appendix

Writing Strategies

An acceptable piece of writing should contain a clear beginning, middle, and ending. Each paragraph should consist of at least 3-7 well written sentences.

Essay

1. Introduction
2. Body
3. Body
4. Body
5. Conclusion

Process Writing

1. Prewriting/Brainstorming Ideas
2. Drafting
3. Revising/Does it make sense?
4. Editing/Spelling/Grammar/Punctuation
5. Publishing/Sharing

Reading Strategies

The following reading strategies can be addressed if students should come across unfamiliar words:

1. Does it sound right?

2. Does it look right?
3. Does it make sense?
4. Did you use context clues?
5. Did you look the word up in a dictionary?
6. Did you ask for help?

NOTES

1 "Dominican Republic - TheFirstColony", [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:field\(DOCID+do0013\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:field(DOCID+do0013)), (12 May,2000). 2 "Dominican Republic – Racial and Ethnic Groups",

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3 Benjamin Keen, *A History of Latin America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992), 85. 4Thomas E. Skidmore and Peter H. Smith, *Modern Latin America* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), 313-316. 5Geoffrey Fox, *Hispanic Nation Culture, Politics, and The Construction of Identity* (The University of Arizona Press, 1996), 3-12. 6 "Julia Alvarez – Biography/Major Themes",

<http://www.emory.edu/ENGLISH/Bahri/Alvarez.html>

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7 Requa, M., "The Politics of Fiction",

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8 "Portfolio of Stars", Hispanic Heritage Month,

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E. "Esmeralda Santiago on Writing When I Was Puerto Rican", Keynote Speaker, HYPERLINK

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Annotated Bibliography

Alvarez, Julia. *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, NY: Penguin Books, 1991.

I visited my friend, a Peace Core Volunteer, in the Dominican Republic during February of 1997. Recently her mother recommended that I read this book. It was wonderful! I chose the chapters that were conducive to the planning of the unit.

Alvarez, Julia. "Names/Nobres," *The Language of Literature: Grade 7 Teacher's Edition Sample*, NY: McDougal Littell, 2000. This personal essay provided me with a framework to begin this unit. It also inspired me to extend my learning.

Fox, Geoffrey. *Hispanic Nation Culture, Politics, and The Construction of Identity*, NY: Carol Publishing Group, 1996.

I utilized this book because it provides an explanation of Latin American terminology and a critical analysis of Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican*.

Keen, Benjamin. *A History of Latin America*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company,

Keen's book provides an historical overview and chronology of events starting with Ancient America.

Santiago, E. "Esmeralda Santiago on Writing *When I Was Puerto Rican*", Keynote Speaker, <http://www.drew.edu/temp/mcaw/keynotepg.htm>, (23 May, 2000).

Esmeralda Santiago discusses cultural identity in a keynote speech.

Santiago, Esmeralda. *When I Was Puerto Rican*, NY: Random House, 1993.

This autobiography was most enjoyable and would be appropriate for any Middle school class.

Skidmore, Thomas E., and Smith, Peter H. *Modern Latin America*, NY: Oxford

University Press, 1997. Skidmore's book is informative and has

given me a perspectival overview of Modern Latin America.

"Dominican Republic - The First Colony",

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(12 May, 2000). This web site outlines the first colony in the D.R.

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"Julia Alvarez – Biography/Major Themes", <http://www.emory.edu/ENGLISH/Bahri/Alvarez.html>

<http://www.emory.edu/ENGLISH/Bahri/Alvarez.html>, (10 April, 2000).

This web site provides a biographical sketch of Julia Alvarez and is quite informative.

"Portfolio of Stars", Hispanic Heritage Month,

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<http://www.kentuckyconnect.com/heraldleader/news/091697/latina/html/latina8.htm>,

(23 May, 2000). This web site provides a biographical sketch of Esmerald Santiago.

Requa, M., "Politics of Fiction",

<http://fronteramag.com/issue5/Alvarez/>

<http://fronteramag.com/issue5/Alvarez/>, (10 April, 2000). Marny Requa

interviews Julia Alvarez using question/answer format.

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